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Peer mentoring: Models and outcomes at QUT

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Chair: Karen Nelson

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Symposium abstract

Students entering university study often experience feelings of isolation and disconnection, both academically and socially. At Queensland University of Technology, like many universities, there is a commitment to the student experience, in relation to welfare, satisfaction, retention, and success. The first year experience is a priority for many universities. Kift and Nelson (2005) described the unique needs of students-in-transition: social, academic, and administrative support. Efforts to facilitate the transition to university for first-year students include transition programs targeted for specific faculties' requirements (McInnis et al., 2000); academically oriented peer support programs (McInnis et al., 2000); reciprocal peer tutoring (Rittschof & Griffin, 2001); online support (O'Reagan et al., 2004); and mentoring programs (Drew et al., 2000).

Peer mentors may be a valuable resource for institutions to use in increasing persistence rates and enhancing the first year experience (Kahn & Nauta, 2001). Some of the benefits for first-year students include preventing the negative effects of stress (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); enhancing the sense of belonging and identity with the university, school or faculty (Evans & Peel, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); early access to information about resources on campus (Clark & Crome, 2004, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); academic success (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); social connections (Pope & Van Dyke, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); skill development (Treston, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); and improved retention (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006).

In implementing a mentoring program, research indicates several factors critical to the success of the mentoring relationship including: organisational support; clarifying goals and roles; matching mentor and mentees; training mentors; sufficient resources; and monitoring and evaluation (Lloyd & Bristol, 2006). The structure of mentoring programs may vary depending on the target faculty or discipline. Key characteristics associated with effective programs, correspond with characteristics that are critical to the success of mentoring programs. These include: the characteristics of the mentor; the size of the mentoring group; the sustainability of the program; the presence of a coordinator; ongoing monitoring and evaluation; and a multidimensional approach (Rolfe-Flett, 2000).

In this symposium, we describe the variety of models of peer mentoring at QUT, in particular, two faculty-based programs and a university-wide program. We outline the individual program models (all distinct from each other), purposes, and outcomes both for the mentees and for the mentors.

Peer mentoring @ QUT: Faculty of Education – MATES

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In higher education, the greatest rate of student attrition occurs in the first year of undergraduate study (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000). In Australia, over one third of students who enrol in university programs do not graduate (Strahm & Danaher, 2005) with student attrition in the first year of university between 24 and 30 percent. Research suggests that the first six weeks in higher education are critical for student adjustment and subsequent success and that student social networks and support are key factors in preventing student attrition. Establishing social networks is clearly important in student transition. Peer mentoring programs provide an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students to make social connections with other new students (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006; Muckert, 2002). Evaluations indicate that mentoring programs have a positive effect on transition to university, sense of belonging, retention and skill development (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006).

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The Mentors Assisting Transition Education Student (MATES) model is an integrated and contextualised peer mentoring program that is situated within a fourth year Leadership and Management unit. Students enrolled in this unit may choose the mentoring topic from several options outlined for a 40% group assessment task. A group of 5-7 students complete a team report on the undertaking of a semester long mentoring project. Mentors are scaffolded throughout the semester by the lecturer who introduces project management tools, and strategies for understanding team dynamics, and team development. Each mentor team works with a group of first-year students and uses the skills introduced in the unit to ensure the success of the mentor project. The program is available to all first-year students. It is self sustaining and cost effective. Mentees report significant gains in social/emotional outcomes as a result of their participation.

Peer mentoring @ QUT: Faculty of Business

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Commencing students entering university study arrive with varied levels of preparation and confidence. These factors may impact on their ability to achieve to the best of their ability and/or may ultimately influence their decision to drop out (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Research identifies needs of students-in-transition, namely academic and social support (Tinto, 2002), as well as administrative support (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

Student diversity is another social issue impacting on university life. In Australia, the diversity is reflected in both Australian students from diverse cultural backgrounds and ESL students. Overseas students now comprise almost a quarter of commencing undergraduate students. (Krause et al., 2005; Krause, McInnis, & Welle, 2003).

The Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology attracts many international students and has recognised the importance of support for both them and domestic students in their transition to university studies. Through Faculty funding the Student Support Program has been developed for undergraduate students, with a primary focus on supporting the First Year Experience and providing support for the development of academic skills. This program addresses academic, social and administrative support through peer mentoring.

In addition to generic study skills seminars delivered in the first semester of study, first year students have the option to receive study support from senior students who can assist with queries ranging from generic to quite specific about faculty core units and some advanced units depending on the level of their progression in their own courses.

This paper reports on the model of peer mentoring developed by the Faculty of Business (e.g., McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000); specifically how the peer mentors provide academic support (Ashwin, 2003; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004) as well as administrative and social support. Critical aspects of recruitment, training, and support for mentors are described. Extensive records about the interactions the SLA have with students and feedback from the students provide evidence for the efficacy of the program, feedback to academics coordinating units in which first years students are enrolled, and form the basis of reflection on appropriate modifications of the practices and skills of the SLA.

Peer mentoring @ QUT: PAAL (Peer Advisors, Academic Learning)

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Planning support mechanisms to enhance university students' learning requires an understanding of learning processes involved in tertiary study, in particular, a focus on self-regulated learning. Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, and Vermunt (2004) proposed that learning involves the interplay of three learning-process components: cognitive (what to learn), affective (why learn), and metacognitive (how to learn). At the cognitive level support may involve facilitating the provision of relevant and timely information; at the affective level support may involve motivating students' vested interest in their study; and, at the metacognitive level support may involve instructing students in how to study.

The literature suggests that peer mentoring is effective in supporting first year students in their transition to university (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2002-2003; Krause, 2005). At Queensland University of Technology, there are several faculty based peer mentoring programs that aim to assist first year students in their transition to university. In addition there is a university-wide mentoring program that offers academic support to all students. The PAAL (Peer Advisors, Academic Learning) service has until 2008 been coordinated by Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS). While academic skills support operates on a number of levels at QUT, the PAAL service is part of the first tier of that support; that is, the PAALs are the "first port of call". The main role of the PAALs is to assist fellow undergraduate students with basic academic skills inquiries, but also address affective and metacognitive aspects (Ten Cate et al., 2004).

In implementing a mentoring program, research indicates that there are a number of factors that are critical to the success of the mentoring relationship (Lloyd & Bristol, 2006). The PAAL program has been developed around the following principles:

- organisational support
- clarifying goals and roles
- training mentors
- sufficient resources
- monitoring and evaluation

In this paper an overview is provided of the history of the PAAL service. The recruitment mechanism (e.g., Weisz & Kemlo, 2004), training (in relation to the model proposed by Ten Cate et al., 2004) and ongoing support of mentors are briefly discussed including any proposed changes for 2009. Outcomes for the mentors, both personally and professionally, and feedback and suggestions for improvements to the service are also reported.

Overview of the PAAL service

The PAAL role is a paid position (HEWA 3 level) and has been operating successfully in the libraries at all four campuses since 2004. The PAALs are designed to be a visible student presence on campus. They have been positioned in various locations within the libraries but as part of QUT's integrated literacies projects from semester 2 2007 they have been co-located with library reference and liaison staff at the library help desks.

This aim of the integrated literacies project is to integrate information literacy and academic literacy support to provide a more seamless delivery of services for students. What started as a project in 2007 is now seen as core business and has seen the both the PAALs and the Academic Skills Advisors relocate from Teaching and Learning Support Services to the Library in 2008.

From 2009, as the PAALs are no longer only offering academic skills assistance, the "academic learning" part of the acronym will be dropped and the PAALs will be known as peer advisors. They will however continue to be the first tier of support or referral point for both academic and information literacy queries.

Recruitment process

The PAALs have been recruited predominantly through recommendations from members of the Peer Mentoring Committee and those involved in peer mentoring programs or student support roles in the Faculties and Schools.

These students were then approached by the PAAL coordinator (an Academic Skills advisor from TALSS) via email and invited to express an interest in becoming a PAAL. They submitted a resume and references and were then interviewed for suitability. This year the PAALs coordinator recruited some PAALs directly from the cohorts of students attending faculty based peer mentoring training sessions which were conducted jointly by QUT Counselling services and the Academic Skills Advisors.

The basic criteria for becoming a PAAL are the possession of a solid GPA (5.5) and the completion of 2 years of study. Most of our PAALs are in their third year, although in 2008 we have employed post graduate students and one 2nd year student.

TALSS aimed to employ PAALs from each of the faculties, usually at the campus that related to their discipline but some PAALs (usually the double degree students) work across campuses depending on their particular situation. This year TALSS employed 17 PAALs with all the faculties being represented.

Recruitment process for 2009

It is envisaged that the numbers of peer advisors will be increased in 2009 and there are plans to centralise the employment process.

Training and ongoing support prior to 2007

The PAALs all received basic peer mentor training from QUT Counselling services and TALSS. Counselling staff used scenarios to train the PAALs in general communication, listening skills and problem solving. This gave them skills to assist students with the affective components of their study such as motivation and self efficacy.

The Academic Skills Advisors continued the training by facilitating discussion with the PAALs around specific academic skills issues. This enabled the PAALs to practice the skills in a contextualised manner and helped them to develop a set of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and suggestions to pass onto students.

In 2008 the PAALs also received additional basic library training in loans and catalogue and database searching and have been included in some ongoing training days with library staff.

Planned changes for 2009

In 2009 it is envisaged that the peer advisors will continue to receive the same level of training and as they are now employed as library staff they will also undergo some additional library Front of House training, WH&S training.

Expectations

The PAALs are **not** expected to read or edit and proofread students' assignments and are not required to be content specialists. They are only expected to provide general advice and answer questions with which they are comfortable or refer students to the appropriate resources or services. Typically their interactions with students are about time and study management, understanding assessment tasks and knowing how to get started.

Outcomes

Data has not been collected to attempt to measure the impact of the PAAL interactions on student's academic success. However qualitative data gathered from the PAAL database indicates that students' confidence in their ability to tackle their academic tasks increases after meeting with the PAALS.

Student was having difficulties with structuring his assignment - e.g. when and how to use headings how many sentences should be in a paragraph etc. I went through a draft with the student and helped the student to identify appropriate headings and group his ideas into paragraphs. Student seemed much more confident at the end of the consultation with being able to successfully structure the remainder of his assignment.

Students who have worked as PAALs report finding the experience rewarding both personally and professionally. They express a great sense of personal satisfaction at helping other students with academic skills development but they also find the experience beneficial in building their own confidence and interpersonal skills and useful material for their portfolio/CV documents as they enter the world of work.

Many of the PAALs hold other peer mentoring, student support or student recruitment roles around the university. These include: PASS leaders, faculty peer mentors, tutors and student ambassadors.

Challenges and improvements

There are several challenges and improvements planned for 2009. These include communication, managing expectations, administration, resourcing, staff development, university engagement, resource development and evaluation. Perhaps the biggest challenges for 2009 are in communication and marketing and managing expectations. PAALs have become known in pockets at QUT however further

university engagement is required if peer advising in generic academic skills and information literacy is to become a useful FYE initiative. Expectations of both staff and students also need to be carefully managed to ensure the service is used appropriately.

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